

PROJECT PROPOSAL FOR INCLUSION IN 2015 UPDATE OF COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

The overriding goal of the project is to make systemic changes to the way Vermont's criminal justice and corrections systems operate. There is general acknowledgement that the current systems don't work – for the offenders, the families, the communities and the state. The challenge in addressing this change lies in the lack of resources and a willingness to risk making a move bold enough make the needed changes. The Windham County Sheriff's Office (WCSO), working with Bellows Falls Area Development Corporation (BFACD), is proposing to take that risk.

WCSO will renovate a building in Bellows Falls, Vermont where the following will be housed: resources for dealing with issues before they reach official legal status; regional dispatch services for law enforcement, fire and rescue; regional training facilities for law enforcement; transitional housing for recent prison releases; facilities for state and federal detainees; facilities for state pre-sentenced offenders; expanded space for WCSO activities; space for supervised parental visitations; support services for returning prisoners including skills training and family case management support; CJIS compliant data center and more. These will be provided by partnering with the appropriate state and federal agencies and with nonprofits.

PROGRAM DETAILS

Administrative uses by sheriff

The sheriff will move his main office and support services to the Justice Center. This will include administrative support, an expansion of the Electronic Monitoring program and space for sworn staff. Locating regional dispatch services will make them more effective by keeping it local, and more cost effective than the current contract with an out-of-state entity.

Alternatives to incarceration

We know that too many people end up in the legal system when a more appropriate alternative could have prevented this expensive and often counterproductive approach. We also know that many persons in the corrections system would be better served by alternatives to prison.

Incarceration raises many issues: human rights issues; economic and financial issues – a family member who is incarcerated can no longer contribute to family income resulting in an endless

cycle of poverty, marginalization and criminality; medical issues – most prisoners come out of jail in poorer health than upon entering; families are seriously affected if either the mother or the father is incarcerated; and overall costs to the state are way too high.

Alternatives are known to be more effective and more efficient. This alternative will combine the best practices we know into one comprehensive approach at a centralized location with better outcomes for all:

- Using the interdisciplinary resources at the site, issues can be addressed in a positive way before they become legal situations. Currently people are often caught up in the expensive and punitive legal system when they didn't need to be. This will allow working with the individuals to come to a resolution using the multi-disciplinary approach made possible by having the resources on hand. Avoiding the legal system in the first place is always the best approach.
- It will allow programs to be individually tailored to the detainee or offender by providing supportive services, education, career training, counselling, family support, etc;
- Offenders will receive skills, supportive services for themselves and their families, and case management when appropriate thus better enabling reintegration into their communities, increasing their value to the workforce, and lessening the likelihood of reoffending.
- It will reduce recidivism by keeping offenders out of prison the first time and by making transitions back into the community smoother.
- It will provide services during the time offenders are transitioning back into communities.
- It will provide a safe place for someone to return to when they feel the stresses are too much and they themselves fear reoffending.
- The surrounding communities will benefit by having between 40-60 new jobs created, by local residents being able to access training provided at the facility, by helping local employers fill their needs, and by seeing costs lowered through regionalized services offered at the facility.
- The immediate Bellows Falls community will see the clean-up and productive reuse of a building that has been an eyesore for many years and is currently the site of many unwanted activities. It will also benefit by increased downtown activity as a result of the newly created jobs.
- The state will see savings in its budgets. The reduction in costs come by keeping people out of the system, by reducing the number of people in prison which is the most expensive alternative, and by providing better supports thus reducing the likelihood of recidivism.

A complete evaluation tool will be designed that will collect data on an ongoing basis so that both long term and short term successes can be measured. .

Housing

Secure Housing

Secure facilities will be provided for both federal and state detainees awaiting trial or arraignment. They will be housed on a floor that will meet all state and federal guidelines for safety and security, and will be separated from those who are housed under restricted movement and free-movement arrangements.

The state will be able to access this facility at less expense than the current prison system. There will be a separate section for women detainees. Currently the only option to hold women is in Chittenden County. This results in high transportation costs for women who must appear in court in the southern counties.

The federal government will save money on transportation costs as currently it must transport from NH and NY to the federal courts in Vermont. This location is ideal as it is near the Rutland and Brattleboro federal courts – the other federal court in Vermont is in Burlington with a nearby detention center.

Restricted movement and free movement housing

Micro apartments and/or individual rooms will be provided for those who have short sentences, those who are at the end of their sentences and those who are at the pre-sentencing phase and are considered low risk. Vermont has recently implemented pre-arraignment and pre-trial risk assessments and needs assessment policies that will help inform the decision by the Judiciary of which particular offenders might be placed here.

Family Units

Three family units will be provided allowing those who have been incarcerated for a lengthy time the ability to live here with their families for a limited time in a supported environment in order to allow reestablishing family ties and integration into the community.

Services for residents of the facility

All of those housed in the facility will be served by partnering with the appropriate entities to provide the following supportive services on site: case management for residents and families; probation and parole; mental health support; substance abuse support; job counseling; work readiness and training programs; education programming; veteran supports; community justice programs; secure medical service for minor injuries and illnesses; and others as deemed necessary.

Because an aim of the program is to help transition back into the community, use of existing services in the community will be the first option when appropriate. Those with restricted movement status (electronic monitoring) and free-movement status will be able to avail themselves of these off site services.

Additional services that will serve the wider community

Many of the services provided will be available to community members when appropriate.

Citizens will be able to come to a safe place where they will have the opportunity to address issues before the legal system gets involved.

There will be a secure video system and rooms for arraignments, attorney-client meetings, meetings between individuals in residence and their families, and visitations for area families with incarcerated family members at other locations.

A space for supervised visitations by non-custodial parents will be provided in a manner that meets the needs of the child, the custodial parent, the non-custodial parent and the courts.

Two or three public inebriate beds will be available to serve those who need oversight until sober but do not need prison or hospitalization

If needed, an area will be made available as a warming shelter during the winter for those who are homeless in the greater Bellows Falls area.

Services for veterans will be coordinated through the Veterans Administration to assure they receive appropriate attention.

AUTHORITY AND CAPACITY TO CARRY OUT PROJECT

Vermont Statutes has established its sheriff departments as “a legal entity with the power to contract and incur liabilities”.(Title 24, chapter 005, subchapter 005, section 290) It also gives the sheriff the ability to have as many deputy sheriffs and supporting staff as is required by the duties. They are designed to be entrepreneurial and serve their communities in the best way possible.

BFADC has secured an option from the current owner Steven McAllister. At the time of the closing (hopefully in early spring 2016) the owner will be either BFADC or DEW Construction either of whom will in turn lease it to WCSO.

BFADC and WCSO have applied for a Rural Community Development Incentive grant from USDA for pre-development costs for the project. If granted, it will cover architectural phase, finance package development, and legal structure of the facility beginning in January 2016.

Currently WCSO has devoted one person to work on this project to move it forward.

The goal is to have the building completed by late summer 2017 with occupancy in fall 2017.

Among others, the project has support from Vermont Department of Corrections, Department of Public Safety, Agency of Human Services, Vermont Judiciary, US Marshalls, Department of Mental Health, CCV, the Vermont Police Academy, and the Veterans Administration.

LIKELY OUTCOME OF THE PROJECT

With all the support from both the state and federal levels the chance of success of the reutilization of the building is great as is the use by both levels. The success of the programming will be measured but every indication is that it will have positive outcomes for the community, offenders, their families, and state and regional budgets. More detail on these outcomes are listed on page 2.

CONSISTENCY WITH SeVEDS GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Increase the number of good paying jobs.

This project will create a minimum of 40-60 good jobs. These jobs will benefit all of Windham County but are immediately located in Bellows Falls which is a high poverty area (19.7%) with a median income of less than 55% of the state average – it has been listed as an FY15 Opportunity Community by USDA which means it has been on the high poverty list for a number of years in a row.

These jobs will be steady, will provide training, will have the capacity for advancement, and will be decent paying jobs with benefits. The types of jobs will be: law enforcement, guards, counselors, dispatchers, food workers, maintenance, teachers, administrative, etc. As the programming grows, it is likely the jobs will also grow. This number does not include any jobs that might be created by the entities providing the additional services.

During the construction phase there will be construction jobs including opportunities for local contractors and subs.

General workforce development

Much of the population that will be served here tends to be on the edges of the workforce. Circumstances have often resulted in poor work habits, low skills, interruptions in stability because of skirmishes with the law. This is a large part of our population and should not be ignored as a potentially important part of our workforce. With better education, training and supportive services they will become more productive in the workforce.

Increase workforce quality

This will happen in two ways. For those who will be housed or find services at the Center, they will receive education and training thus increasing their skill level and ability to be productive. This could happen with courses from CCV, from collaboration with local employers, from arrangements with the two area career centers. They will also receive wrap around supportive services as they make major changes in their lives.

It will also happen by community members who avail themselves of the education and training opportunities that will be offered at the Center. Some will be general - CCV has a life skills course and a job readiness course it wants to offer at the Center; some will be specific - car repair in conjunction with Windham Career Center, or regional law enforcement training where residents can receive professional training.

Raise household income relative to surrounding areas

Whether or not it raises the household income to the level of surrounding areas is not known. But Bellows Falls is currently below 55% of the state median income so it is important to raise it to a more comparable level. This will happen as people take and keep these new jobs.

Regionality

Although this project is based in Bellows Falls it will affect the region. The jobs will be filled by those from BF and beyond, the dispatch services will affect the area budgets, local law enforcement will be able to receive training locally, and families in the area who are embroiled in the legal and corrections systems will have better services and support.

Leverages External Assets

There are two levels of external assets that will be leveraged. First is the cash influx in the rehabilitation of the building itself. It will perhaps be a \$22M project with the cash coming from New Market Tax Credits, USDA, other state, federal and private entities.

The second level of external assets will be in the operating money coming from the Federal and state governments for the housing and programming that will support the newly created jobs. Currently this money is going elsewhere – at the state level it is going to state prisons, and Michigan, at the federal level it is going to NY and NH. Because of the nature of the project it is also expected there will be some amount of grant money for programming coming from the outside.

Quality of Place and Redevelopment/capital investments in existing structures

Both of these seem to be addressed by the potential reuse of this dilapidated building. The building is located at the south end of the Village of Bellows Falls and is known alternately as the Chemco Building or Liberty Mill. It is ideal for this project– it has multi-levels that can be used for different levels of security, has good but somewhat limited access, is near the village but not directly in the village, is not in a densely populated residential area, is located between the railroad tracks and the river, is solidly constructed and open making it ideal for this re-use. It has been vacant for a number of years, and is an attraction for unwelcome activities. If not addressed soon the building will join the category of blighted buildings and will be beyond use. Others have begun to refurbish neighboring buildings, this rehabilitation will be another improvement to the area and the community will have a new resource.

CONCLUSION

This project will to create good jobs thus adding to the ongoing economic viability of Windham County; could be a model for others in the state; will save money at many levels' will provide better and less expensive services to our residents; and will add vitality to a neighborhood and community. It has support at many levels helping to ensure its success. It has all the attributes of a project meeting the goals of SeVEDS.